

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Robert Therrien's beguiling exhibit at the Contemporary Austin

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Brian Firtzsimmon. Robert Therrien's sculpture "No title (folding tables and chairs)" is about four times life size. The exhibit is on view at the Contemporary Austin, Jones Center, through Aug. 30.

Rooms and their psychological interiority captivate artist Robert Therrien.

That much resonates clearly throughout the beguiling exhibition organized by Contemporary Austin for its downtown Jones Center location, a smart review of an artist whose work often remains under the radar, though for decades his pieces have been collected by major museums worldwide.

In the Jones Center's large upstairs gallery, three enormous metal folding chairs and two tables — roughly four times life-size — dwarf the visitor. They are impeccably hyper-realistic — every scuff mark, spot of rust, hinge, rubber chair leg cap and oilcloth tabletop is scrupulously crafted. These are the most ordinary of tables and chairs, just disorientingly large.

And if the gallery's fluorescent lighting seems mundane and rather un-museumlike, that's deliberate, too. Therrien wanted the installation to look as if a rec room card game had just broken up, chairs and tables pushed aside. One chair is folded and leans against a wall. One table is overturned and on top of the other — the floor is ready to be mopped.

There's a playfulness to this Gulliver-sized quotidian furniture, and a wistfulness, too.

Heather Pesanti, the Contemporary's senior curator who organized the exhibit, says that Therrien has an exceptional ability to derive inspiration from his interior world and the familiar space of the Los Angeles where he lives and works.

"He has a profound and complex relationship to his studio," Pesanti says. "In many ways that space is the essence of everything he creates."

Born in Chicago in 1947 and raised in Northern California, Therrien settled in Los Angeles in the 1970s and has since lived and worked there. After nearly two decades in a single-room studio, Therrien was forced to relocate when rents skyrocketed. To alleviate his psychological trauma over moving, Therrien built himself a new facility with a series of rooms, each of which mimicked the original dimensions and specifications of his first studio.

For the current exhibit, Therrien debuts a new series of rooms that, in their modest scale, juxtapose nicely with giant furniture but are no less surreal.

These rooms consist of freestanding constructed boxes, mounted off the ground a couple of feet and with one end open.

"No title (room, panic doors)" features a pair of emergency exit doors at the far end, meticulously hand-replicated copies of the ones in Therrien's studio. Awash in bluish industrial fluorescent light, the room's vertical walls are almost imperceptibly angled in, creating an anxiety-laced sense of perspective as it pulls the viewer's imagination toward the doors.

More poignantly, "No title (room, the other room)" is the replicated bulletin board wall in the artist's kitchen, complete with pushpins affixing photos, postcards, news clippings, coffee filters and other quotidian scraps of life. On the outside, opposite side of this wall is a replication in mirror image of the bulletin board wall.

Or maybe vice versa, Pesanti says. Therrien mixed up the real clutter from his kitchen and the ersatz copies. And it's impossible to discern which is which.

"In many ways, Therrien's work is about the nature of perception and the act of looking," Pesanti says.

The current show is not the first exhibit of Therrien's work Pesanti has curated. His is an artistic oeuvre she has tracked and studied for nearly 15 years, ever since she learned of his work while assistant curator at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, which owns some of his sculptures.

"I remember thinking, 'Why haven't I seen more of this artist?'" Pesanti says.

While at the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo, N.Y., Pesanti spent several years assembling a career survey of Therrien's oeuvre, a definitive show that garnered national attention.

When in early 2013 she landed the job at the Contemporary, bringing a show of Therrien's work to Austin was one the first things she planned to do.

Perhaps because Therrien's output defies easy categorization, it has remained elusive to the art world as well as the general public.

"I think because his work embodies so many art tendencies of the second half of the 20th century, it often confuses people," she says. "His work bears elements of minimalism, conceptualism, pop art, even hyper-realism. It's also deeply personal."

Perhaps another reason Therrien's oeuvre is off the radar even among art world insiders is that Therrien is the antithesis of today's celebrity-seeking artist. More from shyness than aloofness, he declines all interviews and eschews public appearances. (He was in Austin for the installation of the current exhibit but was not introduced to the public or press.)

Pesanti's years of patient work with the reclusive artist mesh with her overall curatorial objective — to unveil contemporary art that might not be what people expect

"I want to shine a light on things less told — uncover narratives that aren't the obvious ones," she says.